

Rev. Nathan Detering

**“The Kind of Brave We Want to Be: A Sermon in Praise of Parkland,
Florida High School Students”**

February 25, 2018

UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Keep our hearts tender.
Keep our eyes soft.
Because what shows up as conceit or bad manners or rudeness
Or withdrawnness
Is often a sign of things no eyes of seen and no ears have heard.
And so we learn again how there is no answer but to love one another.
We gather in community to practice being the person
The world is calling us to be.
We cannot do everything,
But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.
So forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That is how the light gets in.”*

When the kids were younger February break, with its unpredictable weather
(70's one day, snow the next anyone?),
Was a marathon of Legos and board games like Sorry and Uno and Shoots
and Ladders, interspersed with blessed tv time,
Even if that tv was shows like Phinneas and Ferb and Sponge Bob,
Which I'm convinced kids love so much because they are such torture

For their parents to watch,

The six words “*dad, watch...this is so funny*” just about the greatest lie to ever cross the cereal-crumbed lips of my two little cherubs.

But time goes on – where does it go? – and somewhere, somehow

They became two tall-bodied, sleeping, eating, studying, time-with-friends-more-than-time-with-parents, teenage cherubs,

Who will, to their credit, still play board games or watch tv with us on occasion,

But now it’s us saying six different words – “*kids, watch...this is so funny.*”

And this year, for the first time, February break sounded like this:

“Dad, mom, what days are we on to visit colleges this week?

Monday, right? Wed, too? And Friday? You want me to drive on the way

back? I know how you get tired. Home by 5, right?, because I’m hanging

With my friends later. Can I get \$10 to fill up the car?

Do you even realize how expensive gasoline is????”

And so we went, leaving behind the radius of home,

Both in car and in imagination, in miles and in future plans.

We don’t raise our children to stay home, of course,

But that doesn’t make it any easier to see your heart

Walking around inside another body, casting the net wide,

The vision far, the possibilities as distant as the horizon...

And yes, what a privilege it is, what privilege we have,

And luck...and hard work, too, from both child and parent...

All mixed in as we go west one day, and east another,

And even further west another....

And because I managed to break my smartphone this week,
 That tether and lens through which we so often see and feel the world,
 I felt a blend of freedom and fear –
 Freedom from the news notifications and pinging email,
 And fear that I would get lost without gps,
 And fear of what I might miss out on some big headline, like:
*“Senator Mark Rubio returns all campaign donations made by NRA,
 Places daisies in all gun barrels at gun show that took place in Parkland,
 Florida three days after school shooting.”*

Or:

*“Asterix discovered next to 2nd Amendment, reads: FYI, assault rifles aren’t
 we have in mind here!”*

Because if we’re gonna have fake news, we might as well go big, right?
 Imagining the headlines you want to see...is not a bad spiritual practice,
 friends.

I commend it.

February is college tour time, did you know? I didn’t, but *‘duh, dad,
 It’s not Disney time anymore.’*

Which is why, if you paid attention, you might have seen all colors of
 license plates this week parading back and forth on the Pike,
 Cars filled with teams of parents and high school juniors,
 And sometimes unwilling, steeply bribed younger siblings,
 Turning left and right, no straight, no left, not here, there! That left!
 Into the East Coast’s bounty of beautiful, ivied, budget busting
 Colleges and universities,

The families streaming into gleaming admissions buildings holding admissions folders under their arms –

The parents always scanning the financial aid documents and tuition pricing,
And the students scanning the club opportunities and meal plans, and too,
the academics, usually in that order.

We had a habit of sitting in the back – an unconscious embodiment
Of the idea that *‘we’re here just checking things out; we’re not one
Of those eager beaver families, ok? Give us space’* –

And from there I watched as all these families streamed in, especially
The kids, noticing their nervous energy and excitement and
Sneaking looks of comparison with the kids next to them, or connection,
Trying to imagine this next step in their life that feels so big, so scary,
So wonderful,

These kids – not lost on me – the same ages of those kids

Shot at Parkland, Florida high school two weeks ago,

These kids – not lost me – the same ages of those other kids of that high
school who have cast their pain and rage and call to action in ways,

Chanting “Shame” and “BS” to the politicians who they blame for failing
To protect them from mass shootings.

I’ll bet some of those kids were planning on college tours this past week,
too, right?

The ones who are now being called ‘crisis actors’ by some,

And the others who will never get the chance.

God, it makes me angry.

Over the tours we’ve done this year, I’ve become somewhat

Of a connoisseur of the admissions pitch –
The soft sell free meal tickets, the exuberant sophomore
Who gets on stage and tells us how he is loving every minute,
The sober biology prof who thought it was a good idea
To describe how much time you can expect to spend in the lab,
The admissions officer, bags under eyes, who tries to make you believe
She can't wait to read every thousand upon thousand essays.
But the most memorable by far, was the video we watched this week
On the big screen that lowered silently from the ceiling (oh,
So that's where the tuition goes),
And showed a pen-line drawing of the college
With the big tower and the clock and the wide entry way,
And then pulled back to the side to draw a picture of a young person,
Again only in outline,
And then a big arrow from the kid to the college entryway, asking...
"So what will it take for Erin to gain admission....here?"

Let's see: 3.9 GPA? Check.

98th percentile on SAT or ACT? Check.

Honors classes? Check.

Extracurriculars to show you're not just a book hound? Check.

Personal, profound, true essay? Check.

Three letters of recommendations, two from teachers and one from guidance counselor? Check.

What do you think everybody, asks the admissions officer, *will Erin get in?*

And as students looked forward in hope and fear, seeing themselves in Erin,

Or not, wondering what qualities it takes to gain entry, to get accepted,
 I found myself thinking of those kids from Parkland, FL these last weeks,
 Wondering about the qualities they are showing us in the outline
 Drawing of them.

Said Emma Gonzalez in a speech I hope you will go home and watch,
 And who witnessed the shooting and lost friends:

"We are going to be the last mass shooting," she told the crowd. "We are going to change the law. That's going to be Marjory Stoneman Douglas in that textbook, and it's all going to be due to the tireless efforts of the school board, the faculty members, the family members and most importantly the students."

In between wiping tears from her eyes, Emma called out Trump for taking millions from the NRA for his campaign.

"If you don't do anything to prevent this from continuing to occur, that number of gunshot victims will go up and the number that they are worth will go down. And we will be worthless to you." she said.

I wonder: what it take for voices like Emma's to gain entry into the national conversation, and help us build the world I want to live in?

Speaking truth to power? Check.

Conviction? Check.

Vulnerability mixing with strength? Check.

Determination? Check.

The kind of brave I want to be? Check.

Which is why Karen and I keep telling our son: yes, be the best student
 You can be, but even more, be the person the world is calling you to
 become.

Be that person, and everything else will work itself out.

Friends, those of you who have been in our congregation for a while –
actually, since the school shooting in Sandy hook in Dec.2012-
Know how I have tried to challenge myself and us into conversation
On gun rights and gun control.

It hasn't been easy, not least because there is so many other issues
That draw our attention and claim our passion,
And also because I think we have all grown weary of the public
Liturgy that happens after every mass shooting –
The flags at half-mast, the mourning of innocent victims,
The revering of first responders,
And then the balkanization of the politics,
All of us somehow feeling trapped between what can be done and what
We can we do.

But watching the students of Parkland, FL these last weeks has sparked
Something a new in me, and maybe in you, too...
So that while my son is envisioning his future and reaching toward it,
And asking how to get accepted and qualities he needs,
I'm asking what qualities I need, and we all need, to envision
The kind of future and the kind of country where the sanctification of the
gun is no longer the wedge that drives us apart and threatens all of us.

We can't do everything, but we can do something...and
So that something in March is a conversation with me on Sunday, March
11th after worship, and then my invitation to join me and my family
At the March for Our Lives on Saturday, March 24 in Boston,

Which the Parkland, FL students are calling everyone to do across the country.

I'm trying to put my body where my beliefs are; I know you are, too,
In all kinds of ways.

Let our lives speak about what we believe....